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Atari Online News, Etc.
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Dana P. Jacobson, Publisher/Managing Editor
Joseph Mirando, Managing Editor
Rob Mahlert, Associate Editor

Atari Online News, Etc. Staff

Dana P. Jacobson -- Editor
Joe Mirando -- "People Are Talking"
Michael Burkley -- "Unabashed Atariophile"
Albert Dayes -- "CC: Classic Chips"
Rob Mahlert -- Web site
Thomas J. Andrews -- "Keeper of the Flame"

With Contributions by:

Fred Horvat

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A-ONE #1650 12/12/14

~ Ralph Baer Passes Away ~ People Are Talking! ~ MacAranym JIT!
~ Linux Trojan "Turla"! ~ PaymentsMD Users Faked ~ PS Store Hacked!
~ Destiny, The Dark Below ~ Sony Execs "Warned"! ~ Academics Urge FCC!

~ Dislike Button Nixed! ~ Pirate Bay Is Alive! ~ Goblins vs. Gnomes!

-* Pirate Bay Evades Authorities *-
-* EasyMiNT 1.90b With Firebee Support *-
-* Microsoft: Best Look of Win 10 Next Month! *-

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->From the Editor's Keyboard "Saying it like it is!"
"""""""""""""""""""""""""""""

Yes, we're a little late again this week, but it can't be helped. Lots of news, and limited time - it happens.

The "new" dog is adapting well to her new surroundings, and managing to get along fairly well with her new big brother. While we miss our recently-departed "daughter", it's nice to have another four-legged kid roaming around the house again. If you've the mind and inclination, I highly recommend considering you rescuing an animal from your local shelter; it's a terrific experience and you'd be providing a much-needed forever home for an animal who needs one!

Until next time...

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EasyMiNT 1.90b With Firebee Support

I've just made a new version of EasyMiNT that should run on firebee now. (Hope so.:^))

I had some additions to ST support to but that's in alpha stage.

Two things are not working until now on the firebee, the filesystem check during boot and there will be no backup of an existing MINT folder, so you have to be careful!

Now the news.

- MiNT 1.19 and XaAES 1.6.4b are installed now
- firebee support
- ext2 filesystem on ST now
- substituted Teradesk with THING 1.29
- creating an ext2 partition works on the firebee, too.

The package is about 40Mb and can be downloaded there:

http://atari.st-katharina-apotheke.de/download/em_190b.zip

Please be careful, this is an early beta version!!

Furthermore I've compiled a version from E-Nick, the EasyMiNT Network Configurator with Coldfire support. You can get this on my homepage, too.

http://atari.st-katharina-apotheke.de

So, now I hope that there are not to many bugs.:-)

Please post this link to other forums and places, if you like.

Many thanks go to the developers who are working just for Freemint, especially Lonny Pursell, Vincent Riviere and Helmut Karlowski.

Have fun!

maanke

Aranym-user ATARI / OS X

ARAnyM 1.0, that is the ATARI GNU / GPL virtual machine, is published these days.

The *miniPack* which is a minimal configuration of ARAnyM, runs on Macintosh: (http://eureka.atari.org/miniPack.zip) The v.1.0 of the 'MacAranym JIT' application runs from OS X Leopard (10.5) up to OS X Yosemite (10.10). Here is a screenshot at http://eureka.atari.org/aranym.gif).

Comments are welcome. Enjoy, this is yours

FranCois LE COAT
Author of Eureka 2.12 (2D Graph Describer, 3D Modeller)
http://eureka.atari.org

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->In This Week's Gaming Section - Sony's PlayStation Store Hacked!
Destiny: The Dark Below!
Inventor Ralph Baer Dies at 92!
And much more!

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->A-ONE's Game Console Industry News - The Latest Gaming News!

Sony’s PlayStation Store Suffers Suspected Hack

Sony’s online PlayStation store was inaccessible to users for part of Monday in the latest possible cyberattack on the electronics and entertainment company.

Sony Computer Entertainment in Tokyo said Monday the problem lasted two hours but has been fixed globally. It said the cause is under investigation, but there is no sign of any material being stolen.

Last week, the computer systems of Sony Pictures Entertainment were disrupted by a cyberattack and confidential information including unreleased movies was leaked on the Internet.

North Korea was among the suspects, but it has denied responsibility.

The FBI is investigating threatening emails sent to some employees of Sony Pictures Entertainment, and trying to identify the person or group responsible.

There was no indication of a link between the PlayStation and Sony Pictures incidents.

A hacker group calling itself Lizard Squad appeared to take responsibility for the attack on its Twitter account, tweeting "PSN Login #offline."

Earlier this year, Lizard Squad warned that explosives might be on a flight that included a Sony executive among its passengers, and claimed responsibility for a disruption to the PlayStation network. American Airlines diverted the domestic U.S. flight to a nearby airport.

In that incident, hackers orchestrated a so-called denial-of-service attack against Sony, which involved overwhelming the company’s game network with fake visits so that legitimate users couldn’t get through.

In 2011, hackers compromised the company’s network including the personal data of 77 million user accounts. Since then, the company has repeatedly said its computer security has been upgraded.

"It s The Internet s Fault." PlayStation Store Downed Amid Hacking Claims

The PlayStation Store was inaccessible for several hours this morning. Visitors to the site were met with a simple message that said:

Page Not Found! It s not you. It s the Internet’s fault.

The page gave no further information as to the nature of the problem or what may have caused it but Sony was aware, tweeting: PSN update: we are aware of the issues some users are experiencing, and are working to address them. We’ll keep you updated.

The company’s network status page confirmed that the service was ’intermittent’ for much of the morning, though normal service now appears to have resumed.

Hacking group Lizard Squad, which has previously taken down the PlayStation Network, as well as Xbox Live, Destiny and EA Games, referenced the outage in a Tweet, but it’s not clear if it’s claiming credit:

PSN Login #offline #LizardSquad

The outage, if confirmed as an attack, is just one of many to target the tech giant recently. Last month the firm’s movie arm was targeted by a group identifying itself as "Guardians of Peace".

In that attack the corporate network of Sony Pictures was breached, resulting in the alleged theft of unreleased movies as well as confidential information about executives’ and actors’ salaries.

Speculation still surrounds the source of that attack with fingers being pointed toward North Korea, which is known to be more than a little peeved over "The Interview", a Sony Pictures comedy in which two journalists are hired by the CIA to assassinate the country’s leader, Kim Jong-un.

The BBC reports that North Korea, which called the movie an "act of terrorism", has denied its direct involvement in the attack but called it a "righteous deed", which may have been carried out by its "supporters and sympathisers".

The PlayStation Store outage comes days after the 20th anniversary of the console’s 3 December 1994 release in Japan. It also comes just a week after Lizard Squad took down the Xbox Live network which was hit with a DDoS attack. Shortly afterwards the group said:

That’s a small dose of what’s to come on Christmas. #LizardSquad

Since then the group has reportedly targeted PC gaming network Steam, taking 2 million users offline for a short while, and highlighted a White House petition launched against it which has already gathered over 7,500 signatures, presumably from frustrated gamers.

Hackers Contacted Top Sony Executives Before Attack

Top executives at Sony Pictures received an email extorting money three days before the company’s computer network was taken offline in a major hack.

The email message was among thousands released on Monday when the email boxes of two top Sony executives were leaked online. It was the latest release of potentially embarrassing corporate information following a major hack on the company’s computer networks two weeks ago.

"We’ve got great damage by Sony Pictures," the message began. "The compensation for it, monetary compensation we want."

"Pay the damage, or Sony Pictures will be bombarded as a whole. You know us very well. We never wait long. You’d better behave wisely," it reads.

The email was titled "Notice to Sony Pictures Entertainment" and was sent

\at 9:44am PST on Nov. 21 from a Gmail account registered in the name "Frank David." It was addressed to five top Sony executives.

The IP address of the sender wasn't visible because Gmail's Web interface appears to have been used to compose the note, but there was one striking detail.

It was not signed in the name of "Guardians of Peace," the name used by hackers who claimed responsibility for the attack, but was signed "From God'sApstls." That text appeared in a different font, as if it had been cut and pasted into the message.

The God'sApstls name was found inside the malware that attacked Sony, said Symantec.

The email files of the two executives were uploaded to file-sharing sites and the Bit Torrent file-sharing network, and links to them were posted in a message that claimed to be from the same hacking group behind the Sony attack.

"We have already given our clear demand to the management team of Sony, however, they have refused to accept," said the message pointing to the files. "We are sending you our warning again."

The hackers said the email boxes belong to Steve Mosko, president of Sony Pictures Television, and Amy Pascal, co-chairman of Sony Pictures Entertainment.

The Microsoft Outlook mailbox files run to several gigabytes and apparently contain thousands of messages sent to and by both executives over several months.

A handful of the emails, seen by IDG News Service, appear to include discussions between company executives, lists of phone messages that include contact details for executives at other companies, business information, and personal messages to family members.

In one file, the most recent messages point to the email box being copied on the evening of Nov. 22. Sony first learned of the hack on November 24, when computer screens at the company showed a message telling users the network had been hacked.

The release of the email files is another blow to Sony Pictures, which is still attempting to determine who was responsible for the attack on its network. The company has been quiet on the investigation since it launched two weeks ago. Private computer security companies and the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigations are understood to be spearheading the probe.

An initial leak of corporate data soon after the hack revealed thousands of files stolen from company servers. They included confidential business information, the salaries of Sony Pictures employees, staff medical records and computer passwords.

Destiny: The Dark Below - Everything You Need to Know

Space shooter Destiny can be a pretty fun game, but killing the same

hulking aliens over and over in an attempt to level up your Guardian can prove tiring. Fortunately, Bungie has you covered with The Dark Below, the game's first official expansion pack, which features new missions, maps, gear and yes, even more hulking aliens waiting to be disposed of.

Available on Dec. 9 for $20 (or as part of a $35 expansion pass) on PS3, PS4, Xbox 360 and Xbox One, The Dark Below has the potential to give Destiny a much-needed shot in the arm of fresh content. If you're thinking about heading back into orbit to face the Hive, here's what you need to know about the new add-on.

The Dark Below packs new gear, maps and missions that largely center around Destiny's Hive, an undead species that reside on Earth's Moon. An ancient Hive god named Crota was previously hinted at in Destiny's story, but now the Hive have seemingly found a way to revive the deity in order to destroy Earth. No big deal.

Your quest to shut down Crota and his followers will span three new story missions, which will be given to you by a mysterious new character named Eris found in the game's Tower. You'll be able to tackle new Strike mission The Will of Crota to take on Hive boss Omnigul, and, if you're up for a long, multi-layered challenge, take out Crota himself with five other friends in new level 30 Raid mission Crota's End.

Competitive types can check out The Dark Below's three new Crucible maps: Pantheon, Skyshock and The Cauldron. Pantheon is a symmetrical arena ideal for team play, Skyshock is a sprawling battlefield designed for vehicle combat, and The Cauldron is a close-quarters map that promises constant action.

The Dark Below raises Destiny's level cap from 30 to 32, and to help you get there, the expansion introduces a wealth of new gear and weapons. Some highlights include the spider-eyed Arachnid helmet, as well as Dragon's Breath, a menacing new rocket launcher that looks like a shark.

The expansion's new missions, new Strike and new Raid seem to tell a more cohesive story than what we experienced in the core Destiny game. More importantly, you'll once again get to slay enemies with Crota's sword in some capacity, which is a callback to one of the game's very best story missions.

Just as the core Destiny game before it, The Dark Below will be launched with PlayStation-exclusive content. Those who buy The Dark Below for PS3 or PS4 will get an exclusive Strike mission titled The Undying Mind, as well as an exclusive four-barrel shotgun called The 4th Horseman. These items won't be hitting Xbox systems until at least Fall 2015, which is a bummer considering all parties are paying the same amount for it.

Even if you don't buy The Dark Below, the expansion's arrival heralds some pretty big changes to Bungie's sprawling shooter. A recent pre-expansion patch made the game's rare Exotic weapons more powerful, and added more direct ways to upgrade those weapons that don't involve mindlessly roaming around for resources.

While The Dark Below's exciting Exotic gear (like the aforementioned Dragon's Breath) will be exclusive to expansion owners, the update will introduce new Legendary items that all players can purchase in the game's Tower.

Destiny's daily Heroic and weekly Nightfall challenges will be raised by

two levels, meaning they'll be more challenging for players who get their hands on the wealth of more powerful items headed to the game.

For more nitty-gritty details on how Bungie is changing Destiny, you can check out the developer's exhaustive patch notes. If The Dark Below seems like a sweet deal to you, get ready to level up those Exotics and charge into Crota's cave. We'll see you in orbit.

Goblins vs Gnomes Activated!

Goblins vs Gnomes, the explosive first expansion to Blizzard Entertainment s fast-paced online strategy card game Hearthstone: Heroes of Warcraft, is available around the world beginning today! Introducing more than 120 new cards including an all-new type of minion, Mechs Goblins vs Gnomes opens up countless new strategic possibilities for Hearthstone players of every skill level.

In celebration of the expansion s release, Blizzard is offering anyone who logs in to Hearthstone between the launch and December 19 three free Goblins vs Gnomes card packs a triple-powered jolt of mayhem to help players jump-start their collections.

Goblins vs Gnomes throws a big wrench into the Hearthstone works, said Mike Morhaime, CEO and cofounder of Blizzard Entertainment. Players are already having a blast coming up with inventive new strategies and deck ideas we re looking forward to seeing what happens now that they can put those plans into action.

Goblins vs Gnomes throws players in the middle of the epic rivalry between Azeroth s audacious goblin engineers and their equally adventurous gnomish counterparts and these pint-sized tinkerers are ready to stir up trouble. Their incredible inventions and mechanical monstrosities are marvelous to behold but when Hearthstone players deploy them in a duel, the results can be quite unpredictable.

Goblins vs Gnomes card packs are available in-game now for gold or real-world currency, priced the same as Expert card packs from the original Hearthstone: Heroes of Warcraft set. Players can also win Goblins vs Gnomes cards as rewards in the Arena or craft them using Arcane Dust earned from disenchanting cards in their collection.

Goblins vs Gnomes is available now in the Americas region for Windows, Mac, and iPad, and will be available December 9 in the Europe and Asia regions. Hearthstone: Heroes of Warcraft and Goblins vs Gnomes are coming soon to Android tablet devices. For more information, visit www.playhearthstone.com.

Inventor Ralph Baer, 'The Father of Video Games,' Dies at 92

Ralph Baer, the engineer and inventor who was instrumental in the development of the first home video game console, has died at age 92, Gamasutra reports.

While working for Sanders Associates Inc., Baer designed the first

concepts for a device that could play games on a television. With colleagues Bill Harrison and Bill Rusch, Baer created several video game prototypes between 1967 and 1969. They developed the original "Brown Box," a prototype game system that allowed players to play ping-pong and shoot targets with a light gun. Sanders Associates licensed the system to Magnavox, who released the system as the Odyssey in 1972.

Baer's invention laid the very groundwork for the home video game industry. He later developed electronic games Simon, Maniac and Computer Perfection. Baer holds more than 150 U.S. and foreign patents, according to his personal website.

Baer was born in Germany in 1922 and emigrated to the United States with his family in 1938. After graduating from the National Radio Institute as a radio service technician, Baer served in the U.S. Army during World War II. He joined Sanders Associates in 1956 as staff engineer to the manager of the equipment design division.

In 2006, Baer donated his video game prototypes, schematics and notes to the Smithsonian National Museum of American History. That same year, he was presented with the National Medal of Technology for his groundbreaking and pioneering creation, development and commercialization of interactive video games.

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A-ONE's Headline News
The Latest in Computer Technology News
Compiled by: Dana P. Jacobson

Academics Urge FCC To Enforce Net Neutrality on Case-by-case Basis

The U.S. Federal Trade Commission should weigh in on net neutrality and encourage its sister agency, the Federal Communications Commission, to back away from calls to regulate broadband like a public utility, a group of 32 academics said.

Instead of reclassifying broadband as a regulated common carrier, the FCC should look to the FTC s antitrust enforcement practices and examine potential net neutrality violations on a case-by-case basis, said a letter from the academics organized by the free-market think tank the International Center for Law and Economics.

The FTC should urge the FCC to take an approach that promotes, rather than harms, consumer welfare, by encouraging its sister agency to take a lighter regulatory approach toward net neutrality, said Monday s letter. Most of the people signing the letter are libertarian-leaning law or economics professors.

If the FCC reclassifies broadband as a regulated common carrier service under Title II of the Communications Act, the agency would harm consumers by removing some FTC consumer protection authority over broadband, the letter said. Reclassification, in an attempt to ban paid traffic

prioritization deals between broadband providers and Web content providers, could limit broadband provider efforts to minimize network latency, market sponsored content or create joint marketing deals with content producers, the letter said.

Although many net neutrality activists rail against the idea of getting stuck in the slow lane, there are innumerable edge providers that would likely jump at the chance to have their traffic de-prioritized [at lower cost], because their services are time-insensitive, the letter added. For email hosts, backup services, software developer, or any startup company [not trying to live-stream video] looking to cut their transit costs, such an option would surely have at least some appeal.

The FTC is unlikely to push the FCC toward a new net neutrality approach, given that President Barack Obama in November advocated for reclassification of broadband. But the FTC has filed comments in past FCC proceedings, with a comment in a 2014 broadband deployment proceeding noting that the FTC enforces consumer privacy and data security rules with broadband providers.

The FTC, with a Democratic chairwoman, isn t likely to stray from Obama s position on net neutrality, said Geoffrey Manne, executive director of the International Center for Law and Economics, the think tank that organized the letter. Still, the FTC is an independent agency that can and should encourage a different approach, he said.

The purpose of the letter is to encourage the FCC to take an antitrust-like approach toward net neutrality, which, more than anything, means not prejudging all paid prioritization to be banned but rather assessing conduct when it happens to see if it has harmful effects, Manne added by email.

Matt Wood, policy director for net neutrality advocacy group Free Press, discounted an antitrust-like, case-by-case regulatory approach.

Net Neutrality does not exist merely to protect Skype or YouTube from the anticompetitive actions of Comcast or AT&T, though that s one benefit, Wood said by email. Net Neutrality is much broader than that, protecting users rights to send and receive the information of their own choosing.

Strong net neutrality rules would protect consumers and Web content providers against unreasonable interference by broadband providers, no matter the motivation for such interference, Wood added In other words, even in situations where antitrust claims would be impossible to make because the blocked content or service is not in competition with the broadband provider s offerings.

Net neutrality enforced through antitrust-like measures could take years to litigate and millions of dollars to bring a lawsuit against a broadband provider, Wood said. You can see some of the few reasons that putting the FCC on the sidelines is an idea only a cable or telecom company could love.

Pirate Bay: How the File-Sharing Website Continues to Evade Authorities

The Pirate Bay, a controversial file-sharing website that has survived

for more than a decade, was knocked offline following a police raid in Sweden.

The raid marked the first time in a while the site had been knocked offline instead of being blocked by Internet Service Providers in various countries.

Swedish police said they raided servers on Tuesday belonging to The Pirate Bay after being prompted by a complaint by the Rights Alliance, a group targeting cyber crime, according to the Associated Press.

Peter Sunde, a co-founder of the website who is no longer involved, expressed indifference and wrote on his blog that he is "not been a fan of what TPB has become."

"It feels good that it might have closed down forever, just a real shame the way it did that," he wrote. "A planned retirement would have given the community time and a way to kick off something new, something better, something faster, something more reliable and with no chance of corrupting itself. Something that had a soul and could retain it."

"The site was ugly, full of bugs, old code and old design. It never changed except for one thing - the ads," Sunde wrote. "More and more ads was filling the site, and somehow when it felt unimaginable to make these ads more distasteful they somehow ended up even worse."

It appeared that a mirror of the website was back online today under a Costa Rican domain suffix, however with problems with its search functionality.

Despite the conviction of several individuals involved with The Pirate Bay on copyright infringement charges, its high traffic and attempts to block it, The Pirate Bay, for the most part, managed to continue to operate and evade authorities.

One way The Pirate Bay achieved this was by switching from torrent files, which the site was required to host, to magnet links, which offer a cloud-based solution.

The site’s administrators said in a February 2012 Facebook post that the switch would be cheaper and "also make it harder for our common enemies to stop us."

While this may be the most significant blow in recent times to The Pirate Bay, Alan Woodward, a cyber security expert and a professor at the University of Surrey in the United Kingdom, told ABC News he expects the site will "resurrect."

Woodward said the site’s administrators have "distributed themselves in a more interesting way to make themselves more raid proof."

In the United Kingdom, where The Pirate Bay is blocked, Woodward said there are proxy websites that allow users to get around the filters.

"I would be surprised if they don’t come back in some form," he said. "I think a lot of people will fill in the vacuum. Watch that space."

So a few days ago, we re sure many have heard by now that The Pirate Bay has been taken offline due to raids conducted by the Swedish police. Given that the website is backed up and mirrored, many had expected the website to be back up and running in no time, but so far all mirror websites that have appeared don t seem to be functioning, at least until now.

Thanks to the efforts of the IsoHunt team, it looks like The Pirate Bay is back online at the URL oldpiratebay.org. According to the IsoHunt team, As you probably know the beloved Pirate Bay website is gone for now. It ll be missed. It ll be remembered as the pilgrim of freedom and possibilities on the web. It s a symbol of liberty for a generation of internet users.

They also add, In its honor we are making the oldpiratebay.org search. We, the isohunt.to team, copied the database of Pirate Bay in order to save it for generations of users. Nothing will be forgotten. Keep on believing, keep on sharing. It s interesting that IsoHunt is still around despite the fact that last year they were fined $110 million and forced to shutdown.

That being said there is still a chance that The Pirate Bay could come back online in the near future, but in the meantime it looks like IsoHunt s version of The Pirate Bay could be the best alternative, although use it at your own risk because we all know piracy is illegal!

Powerful Linux Trojan ’Turla’ Infected Large Number of Victims

Security researchers have discovered a highly nasty Linux trojan that has been used by cybercriminals in state sponsored attack in order to steal personal, confidential information from government institutions, military and pharmaceutical companies around the world.

A previously unknown piece of a larger puzzle called "Turla," one of the most complex Advanced Persistent Threats (APTs) uncovered by researchers at Kaspersky Lab in August, remained hidden on some systems for at least four years. The malware was notable for its use of a rootkit that made it extremely hard to detect.

The German security company G Data believed that Turla campaign is linked to Russia and has in the past exploited a variety of Windows vulnerabilities, at least two of which were zero-days, to infect government institutions, embassies, military, education, research, and pharmaceutical companies in more than 45 countries.

Recently, security researchers from Moscow-based Kaspersky Lab have detected the first Turla sample targeting Linux operating system. This Linux component of malware points towards a much bigger threat than it was previously thought and it may also herald the discovery of more infected systems.

"The newly discovered Turla sample is unusual in the fact that it’s the first Turla sample targeting the Linux operating system that we have discovered," Kaspersky researcher Kurt Baumgartner said in an advisory. "We suspect that this component was running for years at a victim site,

but do not have concrete data to support that statement just yet."

The modules of the Linux-based Turla malware is written in C and C++ languages and contains code from previously written libraries. The malware uses hidden network communication and stripped of symbol information, which makes it hard for researchers to reverse engineer or analyze.

As a result, the Linux-based Turla trojan may have capabilities that have not yet been uncovered completely, as Baumgartner said the Linux component is a mystery even after its discovery, adding it can’t be detected using the common Netstat command.

In order to hide itself, the backdoor sits inactive until hackers send it unusually crafted packets that contain "magic numbers" in their sequence numbers. The malware have ability to sit unnoticed on victims computers for years. The trojan contained attack functionalities including arbitrary remote command execution, incoming packet interception and remote management even though it requires no root system privileges.

Earlier this year, Kaspersky Labs researches suggested Turla as Snake, which was built on the capabilities of Agent.Biz, the worm that came to the surface in 2008 when US Department of Defense sources claimed that its classified networks had been breached by an early version of the same virus, described by officials as the "worst breach of US military computers in history." Uroburos rootkit was also one of the components of Snake campaign.

Agent.Biz has since been developed with many advanced features that make it even more flexible and sophisticated than before. It was thought to have inspired other nasty malware creations including Flame and Guass.

Online Medical Bill Site Tricked People To Hand Over Health Records

Let’s say you’re running an online portal for people to pay their medical bills.

But now you want to start up a site that has their medical records. How do you get people’s personal medical information in order to populate your new site?

According to the FTC, PaymentsMD got that data by setting up authorizations in tiny windows on the billing site, each of which displays a meager six lines of a far lengthier text that, when consumers click the box, grants the go-ahead for your data grab.

Oh, and don’t forget to make it even easier to weasel away that data by putting a single box on the front page. Anybody who clicks that one box accepts all of the four authorizations at once.

On Wednesday, the FTC announced that PaymentsMD and its former CEO have settled charges that they misled thousands of consumers who signed up for the billing portal, by failing to adequately inform them that the company would seek highly detailed medical information from pharmacies, medical labs and insurance companies.

The FTC charged in a pair of complaints that the company and its CEO

used the sign-up process for the patient portal as "a pathway to deceptively seek consumers' consent to obtain detailed medical information about the consumers."

That's pretty bad, privacy-wise, said Jessica Rich, director of the FTC's Bureau of Consumer Protection: Consumers' health information is as sensitive as it gets. Using deceptive tactics to gain consumers' "permission" to collect their full health history is contrary to the most basic privacy principles.

The complaints say that PaymentsMD, along with a third party, began developing a separate service known as Patient Health Report in 2012.

To get the new site populated with medical records, the complaints allege, PaymentsMD tweaked the registration process for the billing portal to include permission for the company and its partners to contact healthcare providers to obtain their medical information.

According to the complaint, it's only reasonable for customers of the Patient Portal billing service to expect that when they clicked to authorize the site, they were authorizing exactly that: billing.

The complaints allege that once the company and its partners had the authorization, they then scooped up sensitive health information from pharmacies, medical testing companies and insurance companies in order to create a patient health report.

That includes prescriptions, procedures, medical diagnoses, lab tests performed, test results and more.

The company allegedly contacted pharmacies located near the consumers, without knowing whether the consumers in question were in fact customers of any particular pharmacy.

Here's the good news, which speaks highly of the privacy sophistication of many healthcare companies: All but one of the companies refused to hand over the requested data to the company, given that PaymentsMD was after information pertaining to minors and to individuals who weren't customers of the healthcare company contacted.

It was when PaymentsMD began to let customers know that it was trying to collect consumers' health information that the truth emerged.

"Numerous" angry consumers complained to the FTC, it said, having been under the impression that they had signed up only for a billing portal and not an online health record.

All that weaseled-away information has to be destroyed under the terms of the settlements.

Nor can they pull this stunt again, the FTC said, having banned them from deceiving consumers about the way they collect and use information, including how information they collect might be shared with or collected from a third party.

Also, the settlements state that the respondents must obtain consumers' affirmative, express consent before collecting health information about a consumer from a third party.

Moral of the story: Beware the tiny and/or hidden legalese!

A company that’s handling sensitive consumer data in a manner that’s on the up and up very likely doesn’t need to stuff the permissions far away from the light of day.

Internet Freedom Weakens Around The World

By exposing the US National Security Agency’s surveillance programs in 2014, rogue sysadmin and master leaker Edward Snowden likely didn’t mean to spur local governments into more closely surveilling citizens’ data.

But according to a newly released report from Freedom House, Snowden’s revelations were one factor that has led to multiple countries requiring that data be localized and hence more available to local authorities - one aspect that has contributed to an overall decline in internet freedom around the world.

From the report: Data localization requirements - by which private companies are required to maintain data storage centers within a given country - are multiplying, driven in part by NSA revelations, which spurred more governments to bring international web companies under domestic jurisdiction. These costly measures could expose user data to local law enforcement.

Tighter control of data by local authorities is just one of three emerging threats, according to Freedom House, a Washington-based nongovernmental organization that publishes the yearly study of internet freedom around the globe.

Freedom House also described internet freedom as being under siege by digital threats and harassment suffered by women and those in the LGBTI community, resulting in self-censorship in those demographics.

Government critics and human rights organizations are also being subjected to "increasingly sophisticated and personalized malware attacks", according to the report.

In this, its fifth annual study, Freedom House assessed developments in 65 countries that occurred between May 2013 and May 2014 and found that internet freedom is declining for the fourth consecutive year, with 36 of those countries seeing loss of freedom over the covered period.

To assess the level of freedom in each assessed country, Freedom House poses a checklist of questions and subquestions.

These questions go beyond blatant censorship via content filtering or other means.

Freedom House analyzes a range of categories regarding how freedom is impeded, including obstacles to access - for example, does the public have wide access to the internet via public cafes, libraries, or schools?

Does poor infrastructure, such as electricity or telecommunications, hobble access? Does the state set the price of access prohibitively high?

Does the government impose restrictions on connectivity and access to particular social media and communication apps permanently or during specific events?

Freedom House found that whereas governments have in the past controlled citizens' access to online information behind the scenes, they're now adopting instead a legalistic approach to "legitimize existing repression and effectively criminalize online dissent."

Censorship hasn't gone away; it's still common. But throwing dissenters in jail is becoming a preferred approach, the report says.

Blocking and filtering - once the most widespread methods of censorship - are still very common, but many countries now prefer to simply imprison users who post undesirable content, thereby deterring others and encouraging self-censorship. This approach can present the appearance of a technically uncensored internet while effectively limiting certain types of speech.

More people than ever are being detained or prosecuted for their digital activities, but it's not just individuals who are being intimidated.

The new legalistic approach is also being wielded against online media outlets that are increasingly pressured to censor themselves in the face of legal penalties, as well as new demands being made on companies to comply with government requests for data or deletions.

Out of the 36 countries that have seen freedom decrease, Russia, Turkey and Ukraine have seen the most significant declines.

Much of the new forms of repression are in reaction to the fact that internet citizens have found ways around the old ones, according to Freedom House.

Internet users have figured out how to slip past the technological tools of censorship - i.e., blocking web sites and filtering internet content.

One such censorship workaround is GreatFire, a service that takes content blocked in mainland China and hosts it on big, global platforms, like Amazon's servers, that are both technologically and politically difficult for the Chinese government to block.

The report ranks countries with scores from 0 to 100, with 0 representing maximum freedom (fewest controls) and 100 the least possible freedom.

Iran once again takes the top spot for least internet freedom, scoring 89, as authorities continue to hand down harsh punishments, including sentencing people to lengthy prison terms.

It was followed closely by Syria and China, which scored 88 and 87, respectively. The freest country is Iceland, which had only 6 points, followed by Estonia with 8 points, Canada with 15, Australia and Germany tied with 17 points each, and the United States, which scored 19 points.

Microsoft Will Give Us Our Best Look Yet at Windows 10 Next Month

Want to see what changes Microsoft s forthcoming Windows 10 will bring to

your PC? Well, you won t have to wait much longer.

Microsoft has begun sending out press invitations to an event scheduled for Jan. 21 that will give us a look at a consumer preview of the operating system.

Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella will be on hand for the January event, which is expected to offer greater detail on the tweaks and updates Microsoft is making in Windows 10.

Microsoft debuted an early version of the next generation of Windows in September, but that event focused primarily on how the software would benefit business customers. This time around, we ll get to see what kind of changes Microsoft has in store for you, the average PC owner.

Based on what we ve seen from Windows 10 so far, the update addresses many of the issues PC owners and reviewers had with Windows 8. The biggest change for Windows is that you will no longer have to contend with Windows 8 s tile-based home screen. Instead, desktops and laptops will boot directly to the familiar desktop view.

If you ve got a 2-in-1 laptop-tablet hybrid, Windows 10 s new Continuum mode will let you switch from the standard desktop interface when in laptop mode to the tile-centric Metro UI when in tablet mode.

The classic Start button and menu also make a return with Windows 10. This time around, the Start menu features Windows 8-style tiles, as well as a list of programs and apps.

And just because you no longer have to deal with the Metro tiles anymore, it doesn t mean Microsoft is doing away with Windows 8-style apps. On the contrary, Windows 10 actually makes them more accessible, as you can now use them on the desktop screen, something you couldn t do with Windows 8.

So will Windows 10 be the panacea for all of Microsoft s Windows 8 woes? We ll just have to wait and see next month.

Facebook Launches Keyword Searching on Past Posts

Here’s news that will horrify those of us whose pasts include truly embarrassing Facebook posts: Facebook has enabled keyword search on past posts, thus killing the concept of privacy by obscurity.

On Monday, it announced the new Graph Search, which, it tells us, will enable the reliving of "the most important memories of your life".

The new Facebook search is being introduced this week in the US, in English, on iPhone and on the desktop version of Facebook.

The new search will allow keyword search on photos, posts, videos, and/or links about, say, a friend’s wedding, or the equally wholesome content of a chocolate chip recipe a friend shared in the past.

Just search on cookie, recipe, friend’s name, and bingo! You’re one step closer to the recipe your friend shared with you on Facebook and which you thought you’d lost. (One step closer to Type 2 diabetes, but oh well - carpe diem, and carpe carbs!)

Of course, searches don’t always stay as wholesome as cookies and weddings.

With the new keyword-enabled search, anybody with whom you’ve shared content in the past can now search on words such as "drunk", "nude", "party", and "[your name here]".

The new search won’t change your privacy settings. If you’ve only shared content with friends, then only friends can search and find your content.

Then again, if you’ve ever been in the habit of sharing things publicly, anybody who searches could turn up that content.

If that makes you uneasy for any reason, you might want to imagine a few choice words that, if put into a keyword search with your name, would return results that would best be left in the dark.

It’s a good idea to check out your Timeline and/or run some searches with your name coupled with blush-worthy words, in order to ferret out anything that could embarrass you or that you wouldn’t want a current or future employer to see.

If you find such content, change the audience that can view it to "Friends" or "Only me", or just delete it!

If you want to make sure your current privacy settings are up to scratch, you can check what they are with the Facebook privacy dinosaur.

Zuckerberg’s Not Joking: Facebook Still Nixing Dislike Button

Mark Zuckerberg, currently worth $34 billion, continues to brush off user suggestions and complaints. On recurring topics such as a ’Dislike’ button, ever-morphing privacy shenanigans, and user-hostile ’experiments,’ Zuck waxed dismissive. The best he could say was that Facebook takes these things ’seriously.’

It’s increasingly clear that Facebook is just about making money out of you (not that we’re surprised). One has to ask: With ’friends’ like Facebook, who the heck needs enemies?

In IT Blogwatch, bloggers furiously eyeroll.

Your humble blogwatcher curated these bloggy bits for your entertainment.

Zach Miners likes Like, but wonders about occasions when the button "just doesn’t cut it":

Facebook...is thinking about adding more options, though probably not "dislike." ... Giving users a tool to express a broader range of emotions like empathy or surprise might be a useful feature, [Zuckerberg] said.

The executive also defended Facebook’s frequent updates to its privacy policy, saying they were needed to reflect changing technologies and the arrival of new products.

Zuckerberg also [talked] about Facebook’s controversial "mood

experiment," in which the company tweaked the news feeds of some of its users to assess the impact on their moods. He stopped short of apologizing, though he did say it prompted the company to reflect on its internal processes.

Josh Constine liveblogged Zuck’s Q&A session:

Zuckerberg discussed how Facebook won t add a dislike button but wants to give more nuance to how people share emotions and reactions other than approval.

While Facebook gets flack for making us less connected in real-life... the 30-year old CEO...said the product s goal it to let us blow past Dunbar s Number and maintain relationships with more people.

Overall, Zuckerberg seemed confident and affable...though he frequently relied on saying That s a really good question and That s something Facebook takes really seriously to buy himself time. ... Still, it s impressive that he would be willing to so directly and publicly respond to some of the company s harshest criticisms.

And Martin Beck calls out the multi-multi-billionaire’s reply: [You’re fired -Ed.]

 Some people have asked for a dislike button before, Zuckerberg said. ... They want to be able to say that a thing isn t good and that s not something that we think is good. ... So we re not going to build that. I don t think there needs to be a voting mechanism on Facebook whether posts are good or bad. I don t think that s socially very valuable.

 What s the right way to make it so people can easily express a broader range of emotions, to empathize. Or to express surprise or laughter or any of these things. ... There s something that s so simple about the like button. ... But we need to figure out the right way to do it so it ends up being a force for good.

So what the heck is Facebook doing, button-wise? Nathan Olivarez-Giles has the info:

Facebook has rolled out a new feature that will let you click a single button on a business’s Facebook page to book reservations, use an app, go to their...website or sign up for a subscription service, among other things. Facebook is calling these call-to-action buttons. ... Among the sort of buttons you may see pop up on Facebook are: book now, contact us, use app, play game, shop now, sign up and watch video.

This move will...provide additional metrics about what users are up to outside of Facebook, and what they re spending money on, too.

That’s nice, but why should Facebook be only about supporting Mammon? Joe Hallissey comments:

It would be great to have a "Donate" option for the charity I work for, or at least something ambiguous, like "Learn more."

And Kathi Kruse agrees:

My only disappointment is you forgot about non-profits "Donate Now."

As does Allison Young Wilcosky:

What about a Donate Now for nonprofit pages?

[That’s enough charitable whinery -Ed.]

Ron Enderland gives up, but despairs for the sheeple:

Facebook and Microsoft leave the same foul taste in my mouth. Thus I’ve given up both. Sadly, most people will take their **** and stick around, thus encouraging the bad behavior.

’TXPDelta’ mockingly cuts to the chase:

Everybody "Like" me. I am popular. I am smart. I am pretty. I am emotionally fragile. My self worth is determined by my "Like" count. I don’t know what I’ll do if everybody not "Like" me.

Seriously people. If God forbid someone "Dislike" someone or something, the world will keep spinning. Grow some skin and add a "Dislike" button already. It’s long overdue that Facebook has a way of saying that it’s users don’t "Like" something or someone.

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